

## *Collateral Damage Means Real People*

By Ben Kiernan

When U.S. bombs hit a civilian warehouse in Afghanistan last year, U.S. Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld responded: "We're not running out of targets, Afghanistan is." There was laughter in the press gallery.

The bombs continued to fall. We now know that Rumsfeld urges using "the force necessary to prevail, plus some" and rejects "promising ... not to permit collateral damage." Civilian casualties, then, are predictable.

By March 2002, the first six months of U.S. bombing in Afghanistan had killed possibly as many civilians as had been massacred by al Qaeda's genocidal attack on the World Trade Center in New York. The deadly toll has continued to rise, documented by the *New York Times*. The paper reported on May 18th: "Residents of eastern Afghanistan have repeatedly complained of American air attacks that they say have killed civilians." Over the next two days the *Times* reported on a May 16 incident, after which "American officials said that nine Afghan men who were killed in an American air raid there may have been local tribesman, not hostile fighters," and another tragedy on May 12 in which five villagers died when American Special Forces troops raided a "small farming village."

On May 27 the paper reported a similar incident from four days earlier: "An airborne assault on this village by United States-led troops three nights ago has raised fury among villagers, who say soldiers shot several people, killed the headman of the village and caused a 3-year-old girl to flee and fall to her death down a well."

On June 3, the paper reported that "local officials have repeatedly complained of innocent Afghans being killed in the raids," and a month later, that "the Afghan government expressed dismay today at reports that about 140 civilians were killed or wounded in an American-led

operation in southern Afghanistan on Monday." The newspaper reported from Kabul on July 7 that the attack had caused 40 deaths, including 25 members of one family, adding: "This is not the first instance of civilian casualties during the American military campaign in Afghanistan. American airstrikes have hit other civilian areas, including wedding parties, and have been accused by local villagers of causing several hundred deaths."

Twice last August, "the Americans opened fire on Afghans in the Asadabad area, killing five men... The victims turned out to be relatives of a local tribal chief with past Taliban connections, but many here say the Americans killed men with no current links to Islamic militants."

What then would happen during a U.S. attack on Baghdad, a city of five million people? A *Times*/CBS poll suggests that a minority of Americans will support a U.S. invasion of Iraq if substantial Iraqi civilian casualties result. There are good historical reasons to withhold support for operations causing serious "collateral damage."

Thirty-three years ago the U.S. Air Force began a secret B-52 bombardment of Cambodia. In 1973, Congress imposed a halt on the campaign. But nearly half of its 540,000 tons of bombs fell in the last six months of the campaign. The Secretary of the Air Force later said that President Richard Nixon "wanted to send a hundred more B-52's. This was appalling. You couldn't even figure out where you were going to put them all..."

The civilian toll was massive. In 1970 a U.S. aerial and tank attack in Kompong Cham province took 200 lives. In 1971, the town of Angkor Borei was heavily bombed, ending up burnt and levelled by B-52's and T-28's. Whole families were trapped in trenches they had dug underneath their homes. One hundred people were killed, and 200 houses destroyed.

U.S. intelligence soon discovered that many “training camps” on which its Cambodian allies, the Lon Nol regime, had requested air strikes “were in fact merely political indoctrination sessions held in village halls and pagodas.” Cambodian intelligence noted that “aerial bombardments against the villagers have caused civilian loss on a large scale,” and that the peasant survivors of the U.S. bombing were turning to Pol Pot’s Khmer Rouge communists for support.

One young Khmer joined the communists after an aerial attack killed 50 people in his village. Not far away, bombs fell on O Reang Au market in 1972, killing twenty people, and twice more in 1973, killing another twenty-five, including two Buddhist monks.

When bombs hit Boeng village, according to peasants, many people were caught in their houses and burnt to death. Nearby Chalong village lost over twenty. An inhabitant later recalled:

“Many monasteries were destroyed by bombs. People in our village were furious with the Americans; they did not know why the Americans had bombed them. Seventy people from Chalong joined the fight against Lon Nol after the bombing.”

B-52’s scored a direct hit on Trapeang Krapeu village. At least twenty people died. When Anlong Trea was napalmed and bombed, “Over sixty people from this village then joined the Khmer Communist army out of anger at the bombing,” locals recalled.

In March 1973, the U.S. carpet bombardment spread across the whole country. Around Phnom Penh alone, 3,000 civilians were killed in three weeks. UPI reported: “Refugees swarming into the capital from target

areas report dozens of villages... have been destroyed and as much as half their population killed or maimed in the current bombing raids.”

The bombardment intensified to 3,600 tons per day. William Shawcross reported in *Sideshow: Kissinger, Nixon and the Destruction of Cambodia*, that the “wholesale carnage” shocked the chief of the political section in the U.S. Embassy, William Harben. One night, he said, “a mass of peasants” went out on a funeral procession and “walked straight into” a bombing raid. “Hundreds were slaughtered.” Donald Dawson, a young Air Force captain, flew twenty-five B-52 missions but refused to fly again when he heard a Cambodian wedding party had been razed by B-52’s. In one village eighty people died when B-52’s hit the village and its pagoda in 1973. A nearby village was annihilated; a single family survived.

In 1973, the Khmer Rouge were able to continue recruiting many peasants by highlighting the damage done by U.S. air strikes. The CIA’s Directorate of Operations, after investigations in the Southwest Zone, reported on 2 May 1973 that the communists had launched a new recruiting drive:

“They are using damage caused by B-52 strikes as the main theme of their propaganda. The cadre tell the people that the Government of Lon Nol has requested the airstrikes and is responsible for the damage and the `suffering of innocent villagers’... The only way to stop `the massive destruction of the country’ is to ... defeat Lon Nol and stop the bombing. This approach has resulted in the successful recruitment of a number of young men... Residents ... say that the propaganda campaign has been effective with refugees and in areas... which have been subject to B-52 strikes.”

U.S. B-52’s struck Stung Kambot village one morning in February 1973. They killed 50 villagers and wounded thirty. In March, B-52’s and F-111’s bombarded an ox-cart caravan in the same district, killing ten peasants. One local man recalls that “often people were made angry by the bombing and went to join the revolution.” A peasant youth said B-52’s bombed his village three to six times per day for three months, killing over 1,000 people.

Journalist Bruce Palling asked a Khmer Rouge officer if his forces had made use of the bombing for anti-U.S. propaganda:

**Chhit Do:** Oh yes, they did. Every time after there had been bombing, they would take the people to see the craters, to see how big and deep the craters were, to see how the earth had been gouged out and scorched...

The ordinary people ... sometimes literally shit in their pants when the big bombs and shells came... Their minds just froze up and they would wander around mute for three or four days. Terrified and half-crazy, the people were ready to believe what they were told... That was what made it so easy for the Khmer Rouge to win the people over... It was because of their dissatisfaction with the bombing that they kept on cooperating with the Khmer Rouge, joining up with the Khmer Rouge, sending their children off to go with them ...

**Bruce Palling:** So the American bombing was a kind of help to the Khmer Rouge?

**Chhit Do:** Yes, that’s right..., sometimes the bombs fell and hit little children, and their fathers would be all for the Khmer Rouge...

On 3 August 1973, U.S. aircraft bombed the hill village of Plei Loh, home of Montagnard tribal people. An American agent reported after a follow-up mission that “the village was totally destroyed, with 28 civilians and five VC guerrillas killed.” The next day, B-52’s attacked nearby Plei Lom village, “killing twenty people, including children.” On 10 August, Plei Lom was bombed again, killing 30 Montagnards. On the same day B-52’s struck nearby Plei Blah village: 50 died. The U.S. Army report on this noted that “the Communists intend to use this incident for propaganda purposes.”

Another report to the U.S. Army in July 1973 stated that “the civilian population fears U.S. air attacks far more than they do Communist rocket attacks or scorched-earth tactics.”

Up to 150,000 civilian deaths resulted from the U.S. bombing campaigns in Cambodia from 1969 to 1973, before the Khmer Rouge genocide took another 1.7 million lives in 1975-79.

An assault on Iraq, then, may cause not only massive civilian casualties. It could also drive angry Iraqi civilians into the arms of fundamentalist extremists waiting to exploit their misery.

The legacy of a million civilian Vietnamese war dead must also be taken into account. Despite recent attempts to erase public memory of the horror of the Vietnam War, the lessons have not been ignored.

Through the 1980s, according to the Chicago Council on Foreign

Relations, two-thirds of Americans polled said they considered the Vietnam War “more than a mistake, fundamentally wrong and immoral.”

To prevent a comparable tragedy, this time Americans need to speak out in advance. If it happens anyway, those responsible should be tried for war crimes.

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